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THE CONFESSION OF JOHN WHITLOCK

E.W. Howe

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HOWE'S QUARTERLY.

No. 2. JULY, 1891.

Entered at the Postoffice at Atchison, Kansas, as second class matter.

THE CONFESSION OF JOHN WHITLOCK

Late Preacher of the Gospel.

By E. W. HOWE,

Author of "THE STORY OF A COUNTRY TOWN," "A MOONLIGHT BOY," ETC.

ATCHISON, KANSAS.
THE GLOBE PUBLISHING CO.
1891.

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HASKELL PRINTING COMPANY,
ATCHISON, KANSAS,
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The Confession of John Whitlock,

LATE PREACHER OF THE GOSPEL.

CHAPTER I.

I.

BY the grace of God, Amen.

I have been a preacher of the gospel for forty years, but this day I lay down my Bible and hymn book, and shall take them up no more, except for private consolation.

The people have not accepted the religion I have taught, and this has alarmed and distressed me so much that I will no longer be held responsible save for my own conduct, and for good example to my neighbors and friends.

As an honest man I cannot blame the

people for failure to accept the doctrine I have taught, for I have not accepted it myself.

If I have been teaching the truth, the people have not accepted it; if I have been teaching nonsense, I have accomplished no good, nor can I hope to. When I thought of it in this way, I resolved to leave the church and its doctrine, and live by the truths I have learned in forty years of responsible manhood.

In the church to which I belong we believe in experimental religion: that is to say, we believe that the faithful are permitted to know by the experience of years that they are acceptable to the Master, and that they are drawing nearer day by day to the throne for which they started. This I have never been permitted to know. I have received no message, no sign, though I have prayed without ceasing, and with such understanding as I had. An old, white-haired man, I am no nearer the Master than the repentant rebel, though I have always been a faithful soldier of the

cross. I have spent my life in the Army of Calvary, yet the Commander has given no sign of approval. My own experience has been a denial of that which I have taught as the sacred truth, and since the simple theory of religion does not seem to benefit the world, I will no longer teach a doctrine I do not believe.

The people have forgotten the good intention of the pious deception we teachers have been practicing, and are condemning the falsehood. We teachers have forgotten that there are bright men and women in our congregations, who are possessed of as much intelligence and information as ourselves, and the result is that we have carried our pious deception so far that the people no longer argue with us, but laugh at us. This is damaging not only to religion, but to good morals, and I will no longer give aid and encouragement to that which I believe to be wrong.

I should continue to preach did I believe that faith and experience would come later, but I do not believe that

they will. Now that I am free to think, I remember that my father lacked faith and experience as I do; I am certain that the doubts that beset me were often in his mind. I have heard my mother express her fears of the future, and appeal to him for encouragement, but he gave no other answer than silence. Whatever the reward of the faithful, I am certain they are enjoying it, but when I was so young they thought I did not understand, I heard them express the same fear and doubts that have troubled me. I am led to believe, therefore, that there is much of the same trouble among all sincere people. This I have written will be criticised least unkindly by those who have tried to live honest, upright Christian lives. I never talked with a pious man of intelligence that he did not unconsciously encourage me in my doubts. There are many good people in the church, but they do not believe their own doctrine; they pretend to, but their honesty compels them to make so many explanations that their doctrine

becomes unworthy of a life of serious effort.

Why did I profess for forty years a faith in which I did not believe? I did it to encourage others, believing that such a faith was possible, though I was not yet worthy of it; but I became convinced at last that others lacked it, too, and that in professing it we church people only convinced each other that we were hypocrites. I could not have so high an opinion of any man that I should not doubt his sincerity were he to inform me that he had received answer to prayer; not one of my brethren esteems me so highly that he would believe me should I make such a claim, yet our doctrine distinctly teaches answer to prayer, and a great deal more that none of us believe.

I engaged in the work of the ministry because I was willing to sacrifice my life to the Master. I was willing to put aside all hope of worldly gain, that I might serve under the great King; I was willing to die in the field, so poor that my comrades would be compelled

to bury me, but now that I am too old to work, I am confronted with the humiliating belief that while I might have succeeded in my duty to my family, I have failed in my duty to God.

I believed in my early enthusiasm that I was called to the ministry, hoping that stronger evidence would come later. But this evidence has never come. A thousand times I have promised my people that a little more faith, a little more patience, and the clouds of despair and doubt would vanish : a thousand times I have proved a false prophet, though I promised only that which our doctrine warrants. A thousand times my people have looked at me with distrust and pity because my promises did not come true. I told my followers that on a certain day in our journey, we should reach a certain place, which would furnish positive evidence that our faith was

true. When the day rolled round, I pretended that we had reached the promised place, and my followers pretended to believe it, though we all knew that we had not progressed a particle. "Lo," I said to them, "behold about you the greatness of the Lord; his promises have come true," and the people set up glad rejoicing, but in all our hearts there was the positive knowledge that we had not passed the sign-post pointing the way. I have taught that which I did not believe myself, and censured the people for lack of faith. I will do it no longer.

Let me state distinctly my meaning when I say I have failed.

The foundation of the religion I have taught is faith, which means faith in our doctrine, faith in answer to prayer, and faith in growth in grace. By growth in grace we mean that the oftener we pray, the more we are taught by our reason

and experience to believe in prayer; I do not understand that the church teaches that a man grows in grace who practices honesty because it is for the best.

Neither my experience nor my reason has taught me to believe in faith in our doctrine, in answer to prayer, or in growth in grace. I have honestly sought all my life to be worthy of a sign from the Master that I was acceptable, but this I have been unable to receive, though I have taught that Christ revealed his divinity to the thief on the cross, and blessed him.

I do not believe in our doctrine because it does not answer the purpose; the people will not accept it, and if they do not accept it, they will not live by it. It does not satisfy those whom I would teach.

I do not believe in answer to prayer because I have prayed as the Bible says we should pray, and there has been no sign that my humble petitions for grace for the people, and strength to teach for myself, have been heard.

But most of all, I have lacked growth in grace. I have less faith to-day than I had when I started, and in admitting my own lack of faith, I can understand lack of faith in others. I have served a master who would not admit me to his confidence, although our doctrine teaches that I am entitled to this mark of favor; that the faithful always have it.

It has been my duty to teach the people that strength would be given them from on high: I have never been able to receive that strength for myself. It has been my duty to teach that those of little faith are encouraged by experience, and by humbly seeking the way. I have never been encouraged myself as I have promised others, and after searching patiently for forty years, the way is still dim and uncertain.

You cannot control the mind: you cannot say, "This shall go in," or "This shall remain out." The only source of religious knowledge is experience, and when a man lacks that, he lacks everything. Theology is only confusion: a theological education never makes

a better Christian. The best Christians I have ever known knew the least about theology. I have studied the Bible and the commentaries, but I found so much contradiction and confusion that I was forced to the conclusion that man's only guide is his conscience and his intelligence. In future I shall acknowledge only the powers I know and feel.

I began a religious life not because I knew anything of Christ, but because I was possessed of a natural religious fervor, and because I was told by those in whom I believed that by humbly seeking, I should find Christ and faith in him. During the earlier years of my ministry, I suffered constant humiliation because of the knowledge that I had never been converted, although I taught others that conversion was the first means of salvation.

I could give only one excuse to my conscience: I was acting honestly, and believed that conversion and actual knowledge of Christ, would finally come as a result of my faithfulness. At the

end of forty years as a teacher, and fifty years as an humble seeker, I am compelled to acknowledge that I am no better off in these respects than I was at the beginning. As a preacher my relations with the world have been without blame, but with Christ I have had no relations at all. Therefore I shall no longer teach a religion of faith and experience until I have found it for myself.

When I look back over my past life, I cannot avoid the confession that I have accomplished no good; the communities in which I have labored are less religious than they were when I began. I cast my bread upon the water, but those who have received it reproach me with the charge that I threw them only crusts.

This is true of the world at large; the people are drifting away from religion, and every man of honesty and intelligence must admit it. When I look into the future, I am confronted with signs and portents that the world will be less religious in ten years than it is to-day. I have worked all my life, and accom-

plished nothing ; the methods that failed in the past will certainly fail in the future.

To my mind this means that the teachers have taught in the wrong way. It means that the doctrine the teachers have been unable to accept, the people are unable to accept. In the presence of a grave danger, we have been practicing a system that shows no adequate results. There is a plague of sin, and although the physicians realize that their remedies do not cure, they stubbornly insist upon administering them. There may be a remedy that will stop the plague, but the physicians refuse to give up the old potions that have always failed.

I believe in nothing so much as that the right, if patiently followed, always wins. The fact that the church is losing its power over the world more and more every day, convinces me that the church's teachings are wrong ; were this not the case, the Army of Calvary would sweep the earth. I am contented to serve my King, but I must have the

encouragement of an occasional victory.

My experience yesterday and to-day convinces me that I shall be no better off to-morrow in this important matter of faith, and since I feel that either I am not an acceptable instrument of Christ, or that our doctrine is wrong, I reverently resign my charge. We give aid and comfort to the devil's rebellion against God when we are untrue to ourselves, and I cannot be true to myself and teach a faith I believe to be unnatural, and a doctrine that has done nothing for me after a patient trial. Practice has made me ashamed of my theory.

How I have longed for the strength I claimed to have! How I have longed for the help I claimed to receive! When my road has been difficult, I have acknowledged my weakness, and cried aloud in vain for help from on high, but

I have had only the strength in my own weak body: for years I have advised people to pray for strength I have never been able to obtain.

I have had nothing but my faith, which has been growing weaker every year, in spite of me. It has so little real power now that I am ashamed longer to pretend that it is either a great strength or a great shield. I have so little real sincerity, and so little real faith, that I declare with all candor that I am ashamed to profess either. I have prayed so often without benefit to myself, and without evidence that it was a favor to anyone else, that I am ashamed to pray.

I still believe that there are great sacred truths, but from some cause, I know not what, I have not read them aright. And having read them wrong, I have taught them wrong. I believe as firmly as I ever did that there is a Sacred Page, but as I believe in the goodness of God, I cannot believe that there is a divine intention that the people should so ruthlessly neglect the

truth. The people have neglected the truth I have taught, and they have neglected the truth my associates have taught. I cannot believe that a people properly taught would so systematically neglect their greatest interest. I believe that people do their best in everything: in religion their best is their worst. If I am to judge by the rule I have taught, I am not certain I have been the means of saving a single soul: I am not certain my own will be saved.

I am not alone in the opinion that the church is full of insincere men. These added to the superior numbers who are not in the church at all, make a multitude that is appalling. Yet in every hamlet, and village, and country place, there is a religious teacher; a teacher who has been a failure as I have been: We do not lack churches; we do not

lack teachers, but in the sacred name of God I declare that we lack a religion that is acceptable to the people. We do not lack funds with which to spread the Word, but in the sacred name of God I declare that the messengers sent with it must return to Him who sent them with empty hands.

The distressed women who have arisen in my congregations, and confessed to burdens greater than they could bear: I should be recreant to the intelligence that God has given me did I not confess that these burdens were brutal husbands, members of my church. These men I have been teaching; these men have convicted me of failure.

I have attended the funerals of some of these holy mothers in Israel, the one stay of my church, and I have disgraced myself in the eyes of God and in the eyes of men in saying: "Thy will be done." The blush of shame has mounted my cheek in recommending mercy to these men who had never shown mercy to the mothers of their children.

The man who says he has faith, and

lacks it, will have a harder time getting into heaven than the man who has lived an honest life without faith. The man who professes to know God, and is a hypocrite, will fare worse hereafter than the man who honestly seeks, but cannot find. The world is full of men who believe that professing Christ, and not following him, will save them. The world is full of hypocrites who try to deceive God with long prayers and attendance on church, although they pretend to believe that not a sparrow falleth to the ground without the knowledge of God. Putting a sign on the door, "This household is religious," will not prove a saving grace when the messenger comes. I cannot believe, and I will no longer pretend that I do.

I never preached a sermon on doctrine that I believed myself. If I am unable to believe after all these years, what must be the condition of the world? If an old man does not know more than a young man, it is evidence that he has been wasting his time, and I cannot feel that I ever neglected an opportunity to

find the peace that passeth understanding.

The subject that concerns mankind more than all others, is being neglected. As a people we are not so religious as we were fifty years ago. It seems to me that where we have one really pious man or woman now, there were three or four when I began to preach.

Christ is not to blame ; it must be the teachers. Christ said, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light," but we have taught so badly that the people laugh in our faces, and refuse to accept a truth which would be simple enough but for the babel of pious tongues talking doctrine. In trying to establish dogmas, we have made the truth ridiculous. The errors of the church have accumulated until they attract greater attention than the importance of a religious life. Piety is no longer necessary to attain respectability. There was such a time, and many men can remember it. Why is it not so now? Have we teachers of religion actually retarded the moral

growth of the world? It looks that way to me, and in future I will teach only by example.

When an army of superior numbers fails in a good cause, we lay the result to bad management, to dissensions, to desertions, to breaking up into small parties, and following irresponsible leaders. The army of the Lord must bear the blame for the present lamentable condition of religious affairs. As one of the humble soldiers of the cross, I acknowledge my share of the blame. Every petty commander has interpreted the orders from headquarters to suit himself. Many of the commanders have been honest; many of them have not been, but the truth is, the Holy Crusade has failed.

II.

It will be said that I have been an unsuccessful preacher, and that I arraign religion because I have failed where others have succeeded. This is not

true; my associates have failed where I have failed, and I arraign the present religious system for no other reason than that it has failed either to interest or benefit the people, after receiving a patient and faithful trial for ages: I attack no honest man, and I attack nothing that is good and true. The world is not so religious to-day as it was forty years ago, although there has been wonderful progress in everything else, and since we cannot say that Christ is to blame, we must admit, if we are honest men, that the teachers have taught in the wrong way.

I have been a failure as a preacher, but it is not my professional pride that is hurt; I am alarmed because men and women whom I honestly respect are drifting toward a fate which I believe to be dreadful. I am alarmed because I have been unable to awaken them to a realization of their danger, and other teachers have failed in the same way.

I am a plain man, and I have no great powers of oratory, but as much may be said, if we speak the truth, of most

men of my class. I have heard it said of many preachers with whom I have been associated that they were powerful pulpit orators, but I have known it to be true of only two men. These were Bishops, and the world was ransacked to find them. It is said of almost every preacher that he is a powerful pulpit orator, but when the members of a church go about the community declaring that their pastor is a great preacher, when in fact he is only a very ordinary man, they simply bring ridicule upon the church. A man of small ability cannot be made great by undeserved applause from foolish followers. There is nothing so foolish as an undeserved compliment. To refer to an ugly man as handsome only calls fresh attention to his deformity: the man who over-estimates you to those who have never seen you, does you a greater injury than the man who estimates you too low.

I am too honest a man to claim strength where I feel weakness. Failure to interest my people has always been

a burden to me, and I am too fair a man to contend that the people were to blame. There are too many complaints because the people are not interested in dull sermons and dull preachers. The people first tired of these complaints; lately they are expressing disgust. One of the heaviest crosses of religion at present is the listening to sermons on doctrine. It is no part of the duty of an honest man to pretend an interest in that which does not really interest him.

The church to which I belong accepts the theory that preachers soon wear out, and changes us about frequently. It is a good theory, founded on common sense and reason. The revivalist who preaches his set of sermons in a community, and then departs to pastures new to preach the same sermons over again, is declared to be a man of ability; but let him remain in the same pulpit year after year and he will soon prove as dull as the rest of us.

I do not like evangelists, though I have pretended to, knowing that if I did not I should be accused of envy.

I know that many of them set their hearts on making converts as they should set their hearts on doing good; I know that many of them think only of bringing sinners to the mourners' bench, and that they boast of their performances in this direction with the greedy unction that might distinguish a man who had traded horses to advantage. I have been compelled to participate in all this, although I believe in my heart that professional revivalists seldom accomplish good work for the Master. After they are gone, the people count the backsliders, and sneeringly declare that not one convert will be found steadfast at the end of six months. I have observed with disgust the people who stand up night after night at these revivals: professional sinners who want some one to argue, and pray, and be sentimental with them.

Revivalists preach their set of sermons in every town until the stock is ex-

hausted, and then they move on to fresh fields, where their phrases and illustrations are new. The poor fellows who are compelled to preach year in and year out in the same place, cannot be so fresh and entertaining, and behind every departing revivalist is left a people grumbling unjustly at their own pastors. From grumbling unjustly at their pastors, they grumble unjustly at their religion, and harm is done. I have been a hypocrite in pretending to believe in these men, for I never did.

Our mission is the most important in the world, but missions of vastly less importance have better ambassadors. The average business establishments in the communities in which I have lived have had abler men in charge than the churches. There was a time in history when the Church controlled in public affairs; when religious teachers enjoyed so much of the popular respect that they became statesmen and rulers. The decline in this respect has been steady because of the natural dislike of the people for dogmas and creeds, until now

it is thought that anybody will do to preach; I do not say this to offend the many worthy men of my class, but I have lately remarked a disposition among men to become good after they have failed at everything else.

I have not succeeded as a preacher myself, but I have met few men who have aggravated me by succeeding better. The pay is poor, and the brightest men are not attracted to the work; in addition to foolish doctrine, the church very often has foolish men to defend it. Therefore too many of the sermons preached to-day are dull and uninteresting; the people listen to them as a matter of duty, because they are preached on Sunday in a church. Attendance on the churches has been steadily decreasing ever since I can remember, and more rapidly in the last ten years than ever before. This decrease will be still more rapid in the next decade unless there is a change in religious teaching. The people have given notice by their neglect that they will not accept the current theology. It

is not enough for the teachers to reply that the people are careless and stubborn. We preachers know only too well that in our efforts to reform the world we have had no assistance from on high ; all the more do we need the enthusiastic help of the people. This we can secure only by honestly acknowledging our mistakes in the past, and in future preaching Christ as he is revealed to the understanding of men. I have no respect for the honesty of those ministers of the gospel who excuse their lack of success by saying that the people are wedded to idols, when the truth is that the doctrine doled out by the pulpit is responsible. I do not believe in the honesty of any man who excuses his lack of ability by complaining that the people are unappreciative, or lack respect for sacred things. The people are revolting against such nonsense. Since those who have assumed to be their teachers will not give up theories which have so disgracefully failed, the people are proceeding in the work of reform without them.

III.

There has long been too much charity for the mistakes of the church; reform will come about sooner if folly is vigorously attacked wherever found. There are living truths which will benefit mankind; the people should live by them. and teach them to the young: the men who talk mummery to the neglect of truth should be pushed out of the way.

The people have so much respect for truth that they have a mistaken charity for that which was once thought to be the truth. This charity has been extended to those who profess the faith for which there has been nothing but denial. until it has come about that the most serious fault of the church, next to confusion of doctrine, is leniency toward its members; a man who professes to be good is regarded with the same mis-

taken veneration that is extended to a false doctrine that professes to be good.

When I have gone out into the world to teach the people, I have been humiliated and silenced by impious jests on my cloth ; men of no piety often have more respect for holy things than many of those who point out the way to the Holy City. I have never lived in a town where pious rascals could not be found, and they have always had a following in the church, and too much sympathy in the community.

There is reasonable excuse for an occasional black sheep, but there can be no excuse for the manner in which they are often sustained. The world would lay no blame on the church for an occasional bad preacher, were he promptly punished; but every time there is a quarrel over his punishment, and a delay as a result of the quarrel (which is nearly always the case), the very children in the street feel like stoning the churches. It is another argument for worldly people, and they never fail to use it effectively. At every fireside,

the children hear religion derided because of this mistaken clemency. Religious mothers are compelled to blush for their faith, and piety is sneered at in all the public places. The honest men in the ministry, and the honest men in the churches, cannot stem the tide of ridicule, and the devil stalks through the streets with contemptuous boldness.

In the business world a man convicted of dishonesty is certainly no longer in request for responsible positions; occasionally it happens that he is not punished by the law, but society seldom fails to place a condemnation upon him that serves as a warning to others that dishonesty has dreadful penalties. I never knew society to fail to punish in some degree transgression of every kind; it almost invariably happens that where the church punishes a member for bad conduct, it has been forced into it by the clamor of society. Worldly people recognize the necessity for punishing bad men, as a means of safety to themselves, and as a warning to others, but churchmen cling to the belief that a

member may confess his sins, and not only be rid of his evil disposition, but be strengthened in grace.

This doctrine is most pernicious; it has been tried times without number, and always failed to yield the promised result. The church will not be excused for clinging to that which has been found to be false. I admire charity, but no charity is proper if it conveys the impression that a wrong is ever forgiven. A handful of people cannot set the pace for the world, and the world never forgives evil. I have met people in the church whom I should be surprised to meet at my neighbor's. If we accept the command, "Resist not evil," we should stop recommending good conduct, for teaching the right is the strongest form of resisting evil. I believe in resisting evil so vigorously that right will be encouraged. This resistance should be strongest when a bad man assumes the garb of piety, for the reason that he becomes a stumbling block in the way of others. Were religious people more prompt in ridding

the churches of these agents of satan, worldly people would be less fierce in their denunciation of churches and church men. When a preacher is accused of immorality or crime, he should be compelled to walk out of his pulpit: his acquittal as a result of a church trial will not save the church from damaging odium if he remains. It is not true that innocent preachers are persecuted. When a preacher cannot save himself from reproach, the members of his flock should throw him out, and his apologists with him, for the apologists of a bad man are as wicked as their chief.

In a town where I once lived, a bad preacher was called to account by the honest members of his congregation, in response to the clamor of the community, but the dishonest members of his church came to the rescue. There were scandalous proceedings and frequent fights; a mob of hoodlums could not have acted in a more outrageous manner than did the adherents of the bad preacher. Every newspaper in

the land published the proceedings, and every church was scandalized and injured by reason of it.

The people living in the town where the quarrel took place could not help knowing that the man was guilty, and public sentiment at last became so pronounced that the respectable element in the church prevailed. There was a trial, and no one could doubt the guilt of the wretched man. His crime was so outrageous that the Christian people made an appeal to the press for mercy; in the name of decency they asked that the awful facts be not made public.

The bad preacher had over a hundred adherents. Every one of them knew that the man was a scoundrel: I talked with many of them, and they admitted it, yet they fought desperately to retain him. I do not believe there was an honest man or woman among all those who excused his acts; all knew that they were apologizing in the name of religion for crimes which the world never fails to punish severely. They knew they were fostering and aiding a

man who would not be admitted to the average unchristian home; they knew they were encouraging an unclean man to preach purity, though pure teachers could be had for the asking. They knew they were liars in the sight of God, and their action in this case convinced me that many of the worst people are in the churches. It convinced me that the church is trying to reform the world before it reforms itself.

When a man transgresses, punishment is the greatest charity possible, for it will teach him the valuable lesson that he cannot succeed by dishonesty; punishment may cause him to adopt an honest course, and become a useful citizen. The thousands of people who know of his transgression should also know that punishment was swift and sure. The warning that comes from punishment is of value to society; the forgiveness of crime is a detriment to society.

Good people have been in the majority in all the churches over which I have presided, but in many cases the disgrace-

ful minority has been frightfully near the half. I have never presided over a congregation where the influence of this minority did not neutralize the best the honest people could do.

Is this the reason that religion is losing ground? If it is admitted that this is the trouble, then still I am powerless, and I still persist in my determination to quit the pulpit forever. I have fought hard against this influence, but the per cent. of black sheep has increased steadily in spite of my best efforts.

The case referred to is not an exceptional one. Every day the newspapers tell of cases like it. The bad preachers, aided by their bad members, are bringing such dishonor upon religion that the world is drifting away from the church, confident that there can be no saving grace where there is so much scandal, strife and bitterness.

There has been reformation after reformation ; in God's name are we not ready for another? In the dawn of the Golden Age, should we not be as valorous in the cause of Christ as the bar-

barians, who have handed down to us much that we now accept as the truth? Should there not be a revival in every church in Christendom for the conversion of members?

I have no sympathy for the man who is forever trying and forever failing. The man who backslides after every revival, to be converted again at the next, is never a good citizen; the church cannot use him with advantage to itself. No good soldier ever deserted in the face of the enemy. Better let such men remain away, and expend our energy in enlisting soldiers who will continue in the good fight.

When the world or society outlaws a man, he sometimes appeals to the church for charity and support. Many thoroughly depraved people may be found in the church, who are there for selfish reasons. They continue in their old ways, and the people find it out, and attribute their wickedness to the church.

After a bad man has reformed, he may have a right to occupy the back bench in a church, but while his sins are upon

him, he can find no comfort in associating with honest people. I think, therefore, that he should keep away from the church until his presence there is no longer a reproach.

Christ forgave the thief on the cross, but he did not send him into the world to preach. The thief was probably a noted backslider, who was always asking for another chance, and the good Lord showed his infinite mercy and wisdom in forgiving him a few moments before death; otherwise the thief would have resumed his bad habits within a month, and scoffed at holy things, as is the habit of backsliders.

I once heard of a murderer who was to be executed in the modern way. Through the efforts of pious people he professed conversion, and spent his time in singing and praying, and telling those who called upon him what a solace he found in religion. One night he made his escape; when captured he was working in a saloon, and carried a pistol and a knife. I have no more confidence in backsliders than I have in men

who waste their lives in wickedness, and then totter into the church in their old age to unload their sins on Christ. The doctrine of the atonement is responsible for this state of affairs, and I do not believe in it.

There are many people who join churches as they join lodges; to have a warm place where they may spend idle time, and meet others. I have never given the right hand of fellowship to these people with an honest heart; I never believed in them, and I never shall. But my doctrine invited them in, and I was compelled to receive them, knowing that they were a disgrace to the church which harbored them, and would finally make trouble; and they never disappointed my expectations. I have never known this mistaken charity of the church to save a single man or woman, but I have known it to drive hundreds away from a religious life. A doctrine

is weak that commands you to love your enemies as much as your friends. I have never had the grace to love the enemies of the church as I loved its faithful friends, and I never shall have.

There is not a town in Christendom where religion has not been injured by church scandals, and the majority of them could have been avoided had the church people promptly thrown the pious rascals out. In a town where I once lived, a strange preacher appeared, and although "Scoundrel" was written all over his face, he was given a church. He admitted that he had a bad reputation, but he professed penitence, and the mistaken charity to which all honest church people should object, was extended to him. In a month whispers were heard of dissensions in his church. Many of the best members left, and the worst members obtained control. Bad people flocked to the fellow from other churches, and these people acted in a fashion so scandalous that the cause of decency was much injured. They criticised and slandered God-fearing and

honest men and women because of slowness in accepting their pastor, and honest teachers could make no headway against their bad example.

In a year there was the inevitable scandal, and the fellow disappeared for a time, but he soon came back again, penitent, and wept his way into the sympathies of some of the people. For awhile he tried to be a worldling, but he failed in this, although there was nothing he was not willing to do in support of the character. The members of his former church hated him, and he hated them, and their stories on each other were revolting; they knew even more about each other that was discreditable than the world knew, and the world knew enough.

He joined a church of a different denomination after a time, and was finally invited to become its pastor! He accepted, and preached until he was compelled by another scandal to leave. During all the time he was in the pulpit. he was anxious for the sort of notoriety that comes from praying and drinking

beer; from swearing and preaching. Much of my lack of faith is due to the fact that God did not strike him dead.

He covered my calling with so much disgrace that I longed to go away, and finally did. People looked at me on the streets, not with reverence, as I had been accustomed in my younger days to look upon men of my profession, but with disgust and aversion. Every honest man and woman in the town was discouraged and disgusted, all that a professional backslider might be encouraged. Hundreds of people were certainly turned away from salvation that this wretched man might be reclaimed, but after all the sacrifice in his behalf, he pursued his old course.

All of his supporters knew they were disgracing the name of religion; they knew they were guilty of wickedness in encouraging this man. Every respectable door in the town was closed against him; some of his own supporters would not admit him to their homes. It was a cruel wrong perpetrated in the name of Christ. The town where this happened

will never be religious ; it belongs to the devil, all because the church gave aid and encouragement to a man who would otherwise have been a harmless vagrant under the surveillance of the police.

Was this Christian charity, as his supporters said? Was it not, instead, a device of the devil to injure the church? I think it was, and so I shall always think.

In the same town there was a man commonly known as Groaner Hopkins. When he was well and strong, he was a wicked man, but as soon as he was taken sick, he sent for his pious neighbors, and begged them to pray for him.

I made his acquaintance during one of his sick spells, soon after coming to the town, and he seemed in such a bad way that I was finally prevailed upon to baptize him, which I did from a tin wash pan, there being nothing else convenient.

He recovered in a few days, and attended church for a few Sundays, but he was soon as wicked as ever. I finally refused to go to see him, although he groaned pitifully, and said I was allowing him to die in his sins without raising a hand to save him. This was not true, for I had gone to his house at least a dozen times when he was sick; on each occasion he solemnly promised to reform, if he was able again to leave his bed, but he was never religious for more than a month at a time.

Groaner Hopkins was laughed at by every one in the community, and when the people laughed at Groaner Hopkins, they laughed at religion. He was afflicted with some sort of distemper that attacked him three or four times a year, and during these spells he groaned so much for religious consolation that people paused in the street in front of his house to make light of sacred things. Nobody believed he would die, though I sometimes hoped he would, and rid the world of a bawling, worthless hypocrite.

In another town where I had a charge

there was a man called "Weeper Williams." He was really a wicked man, but he seemed to have a passionate fondness for religion. He was turned out of several churches for bad conduct, whereupon he wept in the most profuse manner, and said he was being persecuted because he was sincerely religious. In spite of the wickedness in his heart, he seemed to enjoy his pretended piety; he was a born scoundrel who had a natural pious streak in him, and I have known many such. At the first revival after being turned out of church, he was the first to stand up for prayers; and as soon as "Weeper Williams" arose, a suppressed laugh went round: in every home in the town that night there were ribald jests because "Weeper Williams" was trying religion once more. And at every meeting during the revival, he would stand up and weep, and declare the solace he found in religion. After the revivals, he would attend some church, and finally be taken in, only to be turned out again.

At last he came to me, and wanted to join my church.

"Is it true," I asked him, "that the Baptists turned you out on a charge of dishonesty?"

"It is true," he replied, weeping as was his custom, "but I was completely vindicated at the trial."

"Is it true," I asked again, "that the Presbyterians sent you out of their church?"

"I admit it, but the decision was unjust. That trial attracted great attention," he added, with a show of pride, "but after a patient and thorough investigation I was vindicated."

"I suppose it is also true," I said again, "that the Christian denomination refused to keep you. Were you vindicated of the charge they preferred against you?"

"Yes," he replied, "I was turned out, but I was vindicated."

"It occurs to me," I said, "that you have been vindicated too often," and I would have nothing to do with him.

The same thing may be said of many other professing Christians: they have been vindicated too often.

CHAPTER II.

I.

Having taught for forty years what I did not believe, I now propose by the grace of God to tell what I do believe.

Because God has not been revealed to me, I do not say he does not exist, but I do say that if the doctrine of faith is true, I should have demonstrated it in a religious life of nearly half a century. There will be many to say that I was not worthy to walk with God, and that he was not revealed to me for that reason. This may be true, but I never met an intelligent person who accepted

the doctrine as it is taught by the church; I have heard of nothing in the past to cause me to believe in the doctrine of faith.

I deny that God ever said that he would reveal himself to men; that is to say, I deny that he meant that he would give answer to prayer, or growth in grace, or experience. Had God said it, it would be true, and it certainly is not true; therefore I believe that the men who pretend these things are guilty of sacrilege and falsehood in professing a knowledge and experience which God never intended they should have, and which they know they do not possess.

If God exists, I am willing to accept his plan, whatever it may be: I do not know what his plan is, and I can do no more; and since I have every reason to believe that it was not his intention to reveal himself to men, and no reason to believe that such was his intention, I shall only profess religion as it has been revealed to me.

The fact that there are one hundred and forty religious denominations in the

United States alone, all made to rest on the Bible by presumably good and pious men, would seem to indicate that there is much unavoidable doubt concerning what the law really is. Some of the doctrines of the churches are vicious, and some of them foolish, and none of them appeal to the hearts of men with power; therefore I may be pardoned for going to the same good book for a doctrine that will fit the understanding of the people.

Every foolish thing in the Bible is the work of men. The author of the story that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, was undoubtedly a man who accepted the mistakes of his time, and every part of the Bible which intimates a lack of understanding of the natures of men is more of the fetish theology and solar system of Joshua, who is reported as having performed an impossible thing in an impossible way.

I challenge the statement that the broad road leads to hell. I deny that more people travel in the road of sin than travel in the road of right-

eousness: it is not true, therefore I deny it, in God's name. I declare that the good people outnumber the bad more than a hundred fold. Travel any road or street you choose, and you meet only honest men in weeks and months of journeying: only occasionally you meet a cringing, wretched man who is known as dishonest. The officers of the law have little to do. I am an old man, and I was never robbed in my life: I was never punished when I did not deserve it.

Where are all the countless thousands said to be going to hell? They exist only in creeds founded in fierce and ignorant superstition; the church is willing to damn thousands of worthy people to establish a doctrine that was neither just nor sensible in the first place.

I declare that the world is better to-day and more worthy to be trusted, than it ever has been before, although the present age has been distinguished for its lack of faith in orthodoxy. In olden times there was no lack of faith, and no lack of war to prove which was the true

faith. The camp meeting was the camp of armies, and the teacher of doctrine the soldier armed with sword and lance. The world is at peace to-day because men no longer believe that creeds are worth fighting for.

The men of to-day have more intelligence and morality than any other generation of men that ever existed, and you may be sure that if they do not accept the old theory of ignorant men that the world stands still, they will not accept the old religious dogmas of ignorant men.

Last year I knew a doctor who administered a cruel dose which was generally endorsed by the profession less than fifty years ago, but there was so little sympathy for the fellow's ignorance of the better medical practice of to-day that he was arrested and punished. I heard venerable doctors testify at the trial that the dose administered had once been regarded as wise by the best medical authorities, but was now known to be wrong. Had they been preachers, they would have contended for the old dose

in spite of the knowledge that it had just killed a man. They would have emulated the pious Fathers of the Church who deprived Galileo of his liberty for affirming a natural law because it contradicted a certain Bible story. Though Galileo recanted on his knees, in fear for his life, the world has long known that he was right.

There was certainly a beginning, which we may call God, and certainly a man called Jesus existed, and taught many valuable lessons. That portion of the Bible for which Jesus is responsible certainly simplified religion; I can easily believe that his coming did the race great good. Whether this result came about because of the vicarious atonement, I do not know, but I do not believe that it did, and I do not believe intelligent men think so. As to Christ's divinity, I do not know, but I do know that no one can follow his example and

teaching without benefit. As for answer to prayer and growth in grace, I do not know further than that I have sought both diligently, and never found either.

However the human race originated, I believe that every conscience is a whip to punish bad action, and that punishment is promptly administered. Punishment for bad conduct here on earth is a law as natural and certain as the law that evolves an oak from an acorn. This punishment is not to satisfy a revengeful Deity, but that men may learn to live their lives in the easiest way. In every man's heart there is something that teaches him right from wrong; call it a drop of the blood of the blessed Savior if you will, but this mentor is in every heart, and it never ceases to plead with men for upright conduct, since unrighteousness is punished by inevitable law. This is the mercy we know exists.

There is no folly, however trifling, that a man may commit with impunity, and the greater the fault, the greater the punishment. Whoever created men knew

that they would be tempted to travel many roads to the grave; each man was therefore given a guide that would infallibly direct him into the road easiest to travel. This guide, if obeyed, will make men honest and just, but will not give them faith. This guide will teach men all they need to know; the Father and the Son will take care of the rest.

The more steadfastly men follow the way pointed out by conscience, the more certainly they are on the road to heaven, if there is a heaven. No man ever made deception or dishonesty of any kind pay; the inevitable punishment for his bad conduct is the hell I am certain exists. No man ever performed a good action that he was not rewarded; that is the heaven I am certain exists.

We cannot know what the future of the upright and just man may be, but that he is happier than the wicked while living, there is no doubt: this is the sum of human experience. How the world originated, we cannot know, neither can we know what will happen to us after

we are dead, but we have an unfailing light which teaches us that living here on earth in the easiest way will fit us for the heaven that possibly exists. That these truths should be forgotten in a quarrel over a doctrine of future punishment and reward is unfortunate for the human race. Conscience is the prophet; that it is better to do right than wrong, in every material sense, is the fulfillment.

The world would be better off if the cross should be banished as a symbol of the atonement, and a whip put in its place. Men who cannot understand the doctrine of future punishment, can understand the doctrine of present punishment. The police can regulate where the church fails.

God said, "Thou shalt not." He meant it more kindly: Thou shouldst not.

To-morrow is dim and uncertain except in this: It will certainly bring punishment for every bad act of to-day.

and a reward for every good act. The proof of this doctrine does not depend upon traditions of the past, about which there is much doubt. You need only study your own life ; you need only study the life of your neighbor. For every possible sin there is a warning example in every community. Every man who sins and cries out in his punishment, "I did not know," adds falsehood to his first wrong. No one lies so often as he who says he recognizes and deplores serious faults, but lacks the power to correct them. You hear a good deal about the allurements of sin, but no man has ever proved that sin is profitable. The reason for doing a bad thing is never so good as the reason for not doing it. If a man tells a lie, the day will surely come when it will face him, and that day will be when he would condemn falsehood in another ; it is surprising that a man will risk the certainty of being known as a liar for the small chance of being benefited by a lie.

From the limitless sea where rocks the

cradle of birth, there is a well defined highway leading to the grave. So many have traveled the road leading across the Continent of Life, that no one need go astray; there are sign posts at every step, and living witnesses to testify that there is danger away from the beaten track. The best road from the cradle to the grave has its hills and difficulties, but every temptation to stray away from the highway has been yielded to by innumerable men and women, and every one of them has died leaving this warning: "Keep in the road!" For every one of the millions who have wandered away from the beaten track, there has been a cry in the wilderness. Some of the venturesome wanderers have been recovered, and their scars have borne eloquent testimony to the dangers away from the only safe road mapped out by the experience of ages.

If I had the attention of the world, and knew that every living man and woman would read what I have to say, it would be that it is not necessary to become a thief in order to learn that it

is wrong to steal. I would beseech the people to learn that the bitter experience hidden in the hearts of so many is unnecessary; that the suffering of the unfortunate few should be a warning to the many: that for every sweet in wrong doing, there is ten-fold bitter. This is the lesson that must save the world. The church has taught that there is forgiveness of sin. There is no forgiveness of sin. When a man sins, he injures himself, and we know of no power that will make him whole. If sin ruins health, repentance will not restore it. People never forgive a wrong. In their desire to seem good, they say they do, but if you offend again, they will remind you of your first sin in a way that proves that it was neither forgiven nor forgotten. People may pardon your wrong to your face, but when your back is turned, they will condemn you. The man who himself does wrong is as stubborn as a good man in demanding that others travel in the right way, or be punished if they do not; even sinners expect their associates to be saints. If Christ forgives sin as

soon as committed, the world will proceed with its punishment, and the world has a means of reaching offenders aside from the law, so that no evil doer escapes, however mild his offense.

II.

Every savage people of which we have any knowledge has a code of morals agreeing to all intents and purposes with the ten commandments of civilization. No traveler has ever yet found a people who believe, as a nation, in theft or murder; many tribes have been found by travelers lacking civilization, but not one has been found lacking a practical religion.

Where did they get it? Not from missionaries, not from the Bible, but from their experience, which taught them that doing right is the easiest way to live.

For this natural religion, which must have come straight from God, what does

our civilization offer them through its missionaries? A religion of faith and sanctification, which experience has failed to verify. We offer them forgiveness for sin, an excuse for evil doing which they did not have before; in a word, we take away a religion which God gave them, and substitute Doctrine, which they no more understand than the missionaries who teach it.

We can civilize the heathens, but we can teach them nothing in the way of religion. We have so many homiletics, liturgics, hermeneutics and apologetics that the people are hopelessly confused. Where there are so many doctrines, no one can be certain as to the right one, and we must go back to the human heart for guidance. In the human heart we shall find natural reverence, but also a natural suspicion of the teachers who have taken the same guide book and found so many paths mapped out that human feet cannot possibly travel them all. If a heathen enthusiast should exchange his religion for ours, and come to this country to observe its practical work-

ings, he would certainly go back disgusted. He would find one hundred and forty different religious denominations, each eager to prove that all the others are wrong; and he would remark that they are more energetic in this respect than in any other. He would find vagrants professing to be Christ, and harlots claiming to be the Holy Mother; he would find the members of all the churches professing a creed they do not believe, and explaining in private that they do so to encourage others! Well might the heathen exclaim: "Why did these people take from me a credible religion, and substitue one I cannot verify?"

The former heathen could be told that the men who pretend to be Christ are impostors, but he would make trouble should he inquire who has the right to designate the impostors when it is generally believed that every man may have converse with God. If there is answer to prayer, why may not one man as well as another receive it, and thus know that his belief is reasonable? If thou-

sands of men know that they have been called to the ministry, why may not another man know that his doctrine is true? If faith is a saving grace, why may not the men who profess to have a great deal of it, be right instead of wrong? Indeed, the heathen proselyte might conclude at last that the impostors are all those who pretend to have had converse and communion with God, and feel it his duty to set out to convert the Christian world from error and superstition.

Is it not safe to go backward in search of religious truth? In all the ages of the past, men have been taught by sages that the only true light, "the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world," is reason. This has been said by the Brahmins, by the Hebrew prophets, by Confucius, by Socrates, by Marcus Aurelius, by Epictetus: not compilers of philosophical theories, but men who sought goodness for themselves and others. All the philosophical and religious doctrines of the past aimed to regulate human lives, and to enlighten men with regard to what they must do.

to improve their condition. Buddhism teaches by the animal instincts; the doctrine of Confucius teaches the perfecting of the individual; Socrates taught the perfecting of the individual through reason.

From all this we have turned aside, and what have we instead? A faith we do not possess, and cannot grasp; an experimental religion that we have not experienced, except as a futility. I have diligently sought the evidence of faith and experience, but when I would have believed, there has been revolt within me; and it is the solemn testimony of an old man, that I have always feared my conscience and society more than I have feared God.

I once intimately knew a man of fifty who had been guilty of almost every form of folly. He had never been a thief or a swindler, but he had tasted of

most forbidden fruits, and given them up in disgust for an upright life, in which he found more pleasure and content. He was a man of intelligence and consequence, the head of a respectable family, and I never knew anyone in whose honor I had more confidence; yet he had traveled every prohibited path, and had come back of his own accord punished and disgusted. I had known so many people who wanted credit for doing that which was right that it was refreshing to meet this man, who said that in his case doing right was simply a matter of selfishness; he confessed to being bad in theory, but honest in practice. He did not pretend to be religious, but he was trusted by every one in the community. He was honored in many ways; for no other reason, I have heard him say, than that he had for twenty years been true to himself and his best interests. There is nothing so sure as that the world never fails to reward a good man and to punish a bad one.

It will be said that this man does not act from principle; that he is simply

selfish. Indeed, he gives that explanation of his conduct, but say what you will, he is a thoroughly safe and reliable man. I wish there were more men in the world like him.

If the people can understand selfishness, and selfishness will save them from sin against God and themselves, in heaven's name let them practice selfishness. If they will not accept a religion of faith, and a religion of selfishness will save them, in heaven's name let us call it Selfishness. We have contended for the word Faith long enough ; it is time we looked to the Result. Selfishness has accomplished the good there is in the world: the religion of faith and doctrine has accomplished nothing at all. Selfishness, as a word, is in bad repute, but it is a good rule to live by. Be true to yourself, and you will be true to your fellow men. A man with a proper regard for his own interests cannot afford to violate any one of Christ's commandments, for the reason that he will be punished if he does. Men lack-

ing intelligence will discover this by experience: it is a doctrine all men can understand.

I tried hard to make this man believe that the silent influence of the church was responsible for his good morals, after all, but he would not have it so.

"As a young man," he said, "I practiced many forms of wickedness because of my hatred of the churches. I tried to give the lie to every pious doctrine by my conduct. The little religion I have came to me by contact with the world, by punishment for bad conduct, by being pelted every time I did wrong. As a boy, I was driven to church until I hated the word, but before I was thirty years old, I began to realize that a man cannot live without principles and rules; before I was forty, I had learned that the best principles and rules, whether by design or accident, are founded on Christ. The sight of a church always makes me feel vindictive, for the church should have taught me earlier in life that which I have learned after much bitter experience. I have been beset by

all the passions and errors common to men, but the power that saved me has been related in no way to power from on high. It has been a power within myself; a consciousness that no man can afford, if he considers his own interests, to live anything but an upright life. I have known dishonest men; their history has disgusted me with sin. Every man who neglects his duty is a warning that other men should not follow in his footsteps. I have never heard of a case wherein sin prospered. This knowledge has saved me."

Religion as generally taught is not natural to men; one of the first things a child learns is that it is useless to pray for that which his mother does not want him to have. He has a parallel experience all through life, and however devout he may be naturally, he finally loses faith in prayer.

It seems to me that the intelligent men of this nation are not religious. I admit that many of them make a pretense of piety, but they are not the men who make prayers in public; they are not the men who shout. I belong to a church which is supposed to encourage shouters, but I never heard shouting in my life that I did not blush. Many intelligent men attend church, but they do not seriously pretend to be in earnest; ask them, and you will find that they pretend piety to encourage others. I meet this argument everywhere; I find my own experience repeated: I do not believe, but I pretend to, to encourage others. If our doctrine is not intelligible, why encourage others to accept it? This is often in my mind; it has disturbed me when I was otherwise at peace.

The great moral forces of the world are not in the churches. If you should be confronted with a great emergency, and could select with infallible certainty the fifty safest and best men in your community to meet it, not ten of them would be professedly

pious: that is to say, not ten of them would be in the habit of praying in the churches; not ten of them would be in earnest in supporting religious doctrine; not ten of them would have faith in answer to prayer; not ten of them would profess conversion and experience as the churches teach.

Many of them might attend churches, and support them, and speak well of them, but not five of them would be class leaders: not two of them would be preachers. Every one of the fifty would be practically selected outside of the pious. The goodness and sincerity of some of the professors of religion would not be doubted, but in a great emergency their judgment would be doubted; and this objection to them affords another argument that the intelligence of the world is opposed to religion as at present taught.

These fifty men would unquestionably be men who live by a moral code, but they did not get it from the churches. They slowly formulated it from their own experience that no form of dishon-

esty will be excused by the world; that no dishonest man ever lived as comfortably, as easily, as naturally, or as acceptably to himself and his neighbors, as an honest man.

The statement I have made concerning fifty men selected to meet a crisis will prove true in every community in which I have lived; I believe it is generally true: did I not honestly believe it, I should be afraid to make such a statement. I have noticed that wherever you live, there is a disposition to say that times are better in other places; that people are not compelled to work so hard elsewhere; that people attend church better in other places and give more liberally, but when I have removed to new communities, I have found them much like other communities in which I have lived. I have lived in many towns and country places, but I never lived anywhere and found that the general sentiment was on the side of religious faith and experience; and I never lived anywhere that popular sentiment was not on the side of morality, honesty

and decency; and I believe that the voice of the people is the voice of God.

There is apparently a great deal of charity in the world for evil; the truth is that that which we mistake for charity for evil is simply indecision as to what is right and what is wrong. The charity for evil is nothing more than the hope of good men that bad men may do better.

Every evil doer is so ashamed of his acts that he claims that he was in the right, or denies his wrong when it cannot be proved against him, and the people, in their desire to be just, sometimes give the impression that they have charity for sinners. Could we infallibly know which is right and which is wrong, wrong as an abstract principle would not have a single advocate.

The comparatively few who still profess, without mental reservation, the old forms of faith, are influenced by their natural reverence; by their fear of sac-

rilege. Many pious persons there are who study only the Bible, their Discipline, and the *Christian Advocate*, and they do not know there is such a thing as a progressive theology; they do not know that some of the best and most learned men in the world do not accept a theology of testimony. It will be said that the humble and unlearned know as much of the divine truth as those who are in the front rank of progress and culture. This may be true, but do they know more? They certainly claim to.

Progressive theology is marked by lack of faith in instantaneous conversion, lack of faith in answer to prayer, and lack of faith in experience; every able man in the church to-day is accused of advocating it in some degree: nearly all progressive theologians are men of learning, intelligence and piety. I have never heard of one of these men who brought disrepute on the church with a scandal, or who was made the subject of a trial, except a trial for heresy.

The parable of Dives and Lazarus has caused many people to believe that only

the poor and ignorant can inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. There is also in the Bible the parable of the man who did not make use of the talent given him.

The foundation of the old religious structure is conversion. There are a thousand forms of the word in popular use, yet the word occurs only once in the Bible, and in the revised version even this was stricken out. To my mind this means that there never was much foundation for the doctrine of conversion, and that now there is none at all.

The really religious people I have known were tormented by the fear that their peace had not been made with God. I have never in my life known a worthy man who was insolently confident of his holiness. The strut of some pious men reminds me of a country fellow who has won a wrestling match. I have never known a bad man professing religion who had not a great deal to say

about sanctification. Good men there may be who profess belief in the doctrine of sanctification and inability to sin, but it is more often professed by enthusiasts who are driven away from the cause by the slightest adverse wind. I once saw a letter wherein a man stated, and signed his name to the statement, that he had never committed a sin; I knew personally that he was a thief.

When the doctrine of sanctification was called to my attention, I tried to believe in it, as became a man of my calling, but I soon gave it up. I could not believe myself incapable of sin when I was confronted with the certainty every day that such a claim was untrue, and therefore foolish. There are better men than I am, but that man does not live who is incapable of sin. There is no such doctrine in the Bible; there is no encouragement in human nature for such a belief. Every time sanctification is preached, there is ridicule of the church; and, what is more important, the ridicule is deserved. Every time a

scoffer can prove the falsity and absurdity of one of the doctrines of the church, there are hundreds to applaud, believing that the scoffer has established the falsity and absurdity of Christianity. But the man who argues against Christianity attacks not the simple doctrine of Christ, but the errors for which foolish and fanatical men have made Him responsible. Ask the scoffer you meet on the street his objection to religion, and his reply will be an arraignment of the church.

Some one announces that he knows a thing to be true, and that all who do not accept his doctrine will be damned. This person may be pious, but foolish; many pious persons are foolish. The world supposes that the new doctrine is sanctioned by Christ (although it is probably but the vagary of a very foolish man), and the world with its accumulated wisdom, scornfully proves that the foolish man's doctrine is nonsense. Thus a prejudice against religion arises. It is pious but foolish men, not Christ, who are responsible for the growing lack

of faith in religious things. Hence the necessity for reform in the church before it moves on the world. I respect no man's folly simply because it is pious folly, and the world does not.

The "isms" which fill the world are the result of the dogma of faith. The believers in the "isms" begin in the church, and end in making raps on a table, and believing they were made by spirits. I saw a grave discussion in a magazine lately as to whether spirits appear in the day time or at night. The author was formerly a preacher; it did not seem to occur to him that sensible people do not believe in spirits at any time. He would not have been more ridiculous had he discussed whether Santa Claus comes down the chimney or through the windows; he will finally be discussing the nature of fairies. The churches are full of people like this fellow, who is either a fool or a hypocrite, or a mixture of both.

Some of the worst people in the world are renegade preachers, and every one

of them formerly professed to believe that God knew their every action: every one of them formerly professed an experience and faith that caused intelligent men to blush. Go into any town in the country, and you are shocked to learn that certain lazy, profligate and unprincipled men have been preachers, and I have never known one of these men who did not impiously laugh at his former professions of faith. I have never known this to be true of other classes of men. Lawyers, doctors and bankers who retire always speak of their former business with respect; a formerly honest man in disgrace never speaks lightly of the days of his respectability. Why do outlawed preachers, as a rule, make light of their former professions? Is it on account of the unreality of orthodoxy?

III.

The theory by which I shall live in future is demonstrated by the experience of every man, and is doctrine enough to save the world.

Do we need dogmas to fortify it?

I think not. I deny that orthodoxy, with its foolish and fanatical teachers, helps men to live the simple religion of the understanding, which unfailingly teaches them right from wrong. In combating creeds, men are too apt to forget that there is a true religion of the greatest importance.

The church teaches upright conduct, but it teaches that faith is of paramount importance: it teaches that the best men can do is not enough. If orthodoxy is

right there will be no redeemed: men cannot perform the tasks required of them.

I have talked with hundreds of intelligent clergymen who gave as an excuse for their preaching a creed unsupported by sense and experience, that men need a moral code to live by; that the world would go headlong to ruin but for the influence of religion. There is a grain of truth in this, but an intricate ethical system is never so good as a simple one, when the end aimed at in each is exactly the same; and a moral system containing absurdities that can be pointed out by every one, is never so good as a moral system without absurdities.

Justice is more promptly administered on the frontier of our country than on the Atlantic sea-board. The explanation is that the ethics of the frontier are not so complex. The engine of the law has become so cumbrous that men are afraid of it; justice in the courts costs more than it is worth: it costs ten dollars to collect five.

The same is true of orthodoxy: it has become so intricate that men are afraid of it, and will not accept it, for the reason that there is a shorter road to the same goal. For every hour preachers spend in teaching morality, they talk ten hours on foolish dogmas they do not believe, and which they know the people do not believe. The churches will never agree on what is right and what is wrong until they simplify their creeds. Truth is found in simplicity; falsehood in complexity. The dogmas of the church do more harm than the moral system of the church does good. A dogma teaching an angry Judge at the end of life is not so effective in keeping men in the right way as the actual experience that there is no forgiveness for sin, and the knowledge that honesty is the best investment a man ever made, even in this present life. If repentance will save the world, then the world is saved already, for there never was a wrong committed that was not followed by repentance.

It is better not to preach reform at all than to preach impossible reform, which

serves only to discourage the people, and convince them that there is no use in trying. In spite of all the preaching that has been done, there is less religious faith in the world this moment than ever before. Most men who preach, and most men who write, seem ashamed to acknowledge the actual nature and condition of the people. Hypocrites are constantly abusing other hypocrites for their hypocrisy, and we are all harmed by the refusal to profit by the lights given us for guidance.

Every man adopts the doctrine under which his conscience rests most easy. There are thousands of men who are perfectly easy as to their future, though they lack a religion of faith, but there never was a man who could get rid of an uneasy dread when he was untrue to his conscience. Every man is his own Redeemer: his Savior is the power within him that approves his acts when they are right, and condemns when they are wrong. The true plan of salvation is for a man to do right, not to please God, but because it is best for himself. If a bad

man profess piety, God will give no sign of displeasure, but the community in which the bad man lives will condemn his hypocrisy, and the bad man cannot deceive himself.

There are churches teaching that which Christ himself did not teach. Indeed, there are churches teaching that which Christ specifically denied. If we admit the divinity of Christ, we admit that he came as a messenger from God, to correct the mistakes made by men in reading the Mosaic law. His words indicated this: "Ye have heard," he said, "'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say unto you. resist not evil." Is it impious or improper to condemn the churches for teaching that which the Son of God did not teach? There is a plague of doctrine which is doing harm, and if a man think he possesses a remedy, it surely is both his privilege and his duty to suggest it.

There can be no religious reform until the churches admit their mistakes; with too many men religion is a hobby rather than a principle. I believe all pious

men pretend to believe in church union, but I discovered once that a man who preached church union a great deal was simply a Baptist trying to induce the world to accept the Baptist faith; he was not willing to give up anything to accomplish his purpose. All the church unionists throughout the great number of denominations with which this country is afflicted, have the same narrow understanding of a united church that will sweep the world. Not one of them is willing to return to the simple religion of the understanding, which all men will accept.

Very few of the churches contend today that doctrine is important: that is, a man who contends for baptism does not care to say, in this enlightened age, that a man may not be saved who has been only sprinkled. Therefore doctrine is nothing more than a means of supplying men with arguments against religion.

Pious men there are who will blush if you mention some of the tenets of the church with which they worship. The tenet which causes the pious man to

blush, because of its absurdity and unfairness, and utter lack of the stamp of God's wisdom or goodness, is the point attacked by the world; by means of it worldly men make out a case against religion, and careless and busy men believe that the doctrine of Christ has been overthrown by men. Who can doubt that such a tenet does harm? Who can doubt that the men who refuse, after solemn council, to give up such doctrine, and confess their mistakes, are the real instruments of satan? Who can seriously doubt that it would be better to teach a simple and natural religion, which declares that no condition can be imagined where wrong of any kind will prosper? A rational religion will teach no more than this.

Instead of Christ's simple truth that men should live righteously because righteousness is best for their temporal welfare, we have dogmas teaching that angels hover round; instead of the simple truth that no man can afford to be wicked, and that Christ's yoke is easy, we have the dogma of the faithful giving

up pleasures on earth that they may enjoy them hereafter, in mansions not made with hands, and in a celestial city paved with gold. I am tired of hearing of the men who are staggering under Christ's burden; the churches are full of men who claim to be carrying heavy crosses, and all of them are hypocrites. A man who lives by Christ's doctrine simply lives an honest life; he simply lives his life in the easiest way. By accepting Christ, men rid themselves of burdens: the men who carry burdens are the disciples of satan.

I have no great respect for the intelligence of those who see angels, however much I may believe in their piety; in all my preaching I have never quoted these people, believing that for every soul cheered by such arguments, twenty intelligent minds are filled with distrust of Christianity. I believe a religious

system is wrong that promises more than can be fulfilled, for the reason that men are constantly looking for opportunity to hate a religion of faith.

Whenever the church finds a disposition in men opposed to its doctrine, it calls that disposition "sinful," and there is so much talk in the churches of "sin" as to become an admission that the churches do not understand the natures of men.

When men will not accept a faith that is unnatural to them, the churches call it hardness of heart. I do not believe in the hardness of any heart, though I have heard much about it. On the contrary, I believe there is natural piety in every human breast, and that weak and wretched man would not fight a natural belief in an Infinite Being. That which is called hardness of heart is inability to believe the puerilities with which natural religion is overlaid. If a man cannot believe, he cannot; if I lack faith I cannot deceive God by saying I have it. A good man who lacks faith is better than a bad man who professes it. The mere

saying, "I believe," does not satisfy God. Indeed, it must displease him when it is not true, and it usually is untrue. I would rather honestly say, "I cannot believe," than say, "I believe," and not speak the truth.

There is a strong bias to unbelief in every heart. Somewhere there is the remedy for it. This is what we must set ourselves to look for. It can be found. Surely God did not create a race of men unable to believe, and then damn them for it.

All men desire a religion. There is every reason why they should. But thousands of them cannot exercise the faith said to be necessary. There is nothing in the doctrine that men are stubbornly opposed to religion. The idea is preposterous. The atom, man, is willing to lean on the Infinite, once he is convinced of the Infinite. In his march toward death, he thirsts for the water of life. Men are ready to flock to Christ in innumerable multitudes, if given the opportunity.

You can readily induce any man at any time to talk on religion; it is because he feels the importance of the subject. The many forms of religion are simply evidence, and the strongest evidence, of the universal interest that men feel in the matter. Men are naturally religious, and are willing to have a faith, and live by it, if that faith will fit their reason and their nature.

Reform in the churches is necessary before we can have a revival of religion. The weapons that do most harm to religion are furnished by the churches, with their creeds, dogmas, and hypocrisies. At the present rate of decline, it will not be long before all the Christians will be outside of the church, and the teachers of dogma will represent the devil only.

Sin is ignorance: the mistake of children and fools. Rational religion is the knowledge that every kind of wrong brings its punishment here and now, and without exception. Rational piety is to do right because of the knowledge that you will be punished if you do wrong. I do not mean punished hereafter (for none of us believe in hell any more), but punished here on earth, as certainly as we all must die. Faith is but the knowledge that the good and honest way to live is the best and easiest way: the way that yields the greatest pleasure and comfort.

This is the gospel that should be thundered from the pulpit by men of energy and sense. Those who want to add dogmas that have retarded religious progress, should have the privilege, but should not be allowed to abuse it by accusing the people of being foolish when they are really sensible.

The droning sermons heard Sunday after Sunday concerning impossible faith and foolish doctrine, should be changed to warnings such as a wise old man

might give to his children; sermons from life, instead of sermons on creeds. No religion except that of common sense will prevent a man's doing that which is instinctive with him. He rebels against faith, but he can understand that there is no good sense in one pleasure at the expense of two pains.

This is my opinion, and why is it not as good as another man's? I do not seek an argument, for there has been too much of that already; I seek only the truth, and if I have not found it, let another declare it. I speak for the people. They cannot do that which is required of them by their religious teachers. The doctrines which have resulted in so much confusion were invented by men who are in the church as a business. The people whom these men are supposed to instruct have a right to be heard, and a right to demand that the religious teaching for which they pay shall not be mere rubbish.

When man tires of sin, as he is sure to do, and seeks relief in the church, the remedy offered is an impossible one.

"Ask, and ye shall receive," is the doctrine taught. To his humble petitions there is silence; unanswered he goes back into the darkness, whereas, had he been properly directed, he might have found the light. Teachers who know the falsity of their teaching, try to deceive him, and he cannot help knowing it. We have been practicing a cruel wrong; we have been leading the people astray, instead of putting their feet in the right path.

The religion of the reason will aid a man to live an honest life though he has never heard of Christ, and never expects to see him after he is dead. Thousands of good men are known as infidels because they refuse to accept some foolish doctrine. Whoever is a good man is a follower of Christ.

The teachers of religion charge all their failures to the carelessness of the

people. If the people are in danger, as I believe they are, they can be convinced of it, and there is nothing in the Good Book to the contrary. But I solemnly declare that the people are in no alarm about themselves on the score of their not accepting religion as it is presented, nor have they any reason to be.

Pious people make a mistake when they represent sin as pleasant. Many of them do not know any better, and for this reason the simple fact that honest living is profitable for its own sake, should be more generally urged on the attention. The teaching of this truth, with less insistence on faith, would be a blessing. When a man is young, and knows least, he builds the foundation for everything that comes after, and practical truths are of particular value to him at that time.

Some of the people who groan about the heavy cross they are compelled to carry, no doubt believe that because of their religion, they are missing a great deal of pleasure. This skulking admiration for wicked things springs from an ignorance that does harm; it deceives

the young, and begets in them the desire to experiment with sin, and sometimes, before they learn their mistake, they are so loathsome that society will have nothing more to do with them.

Good conduct is so important to man's well-being that we should defend it with respect and dignity: it should never be lightly spoken of, and those are poor jests that will cause the young to believe that we would all be libertines and drunkards did we not fear God's displeasure. The young are only too apt to take advantage of the theory of forgiveness, and thereby do themselves serious harm. The young should be taught that however much they may be tempted, and however much they may dislike the right way, they cannot afford to neglect the lessons learned from their mothers, for so surely as we are tempted by the devil, so surely are we punished if we yield. There are men who will not abandon their bad ways. This proves their ignorance of the most important truth known: that sin is man's worst enemy here on earth,

without reference to the world to come. A wicked man is an ignorant man who believes that some time, and somewhere, he will find evil profitable, but all history has demonstrated that there never was such a time, and never such a place.

There have been thousands of theories, but only one has always been capable of verification, and had the sanction of all men: that no one for his own sake can afford wickedness of any kind. There never was a man who admitted that he had done wrong without seeking to explain it. This means that every man who has done wrong has been punished. When you feel like going to the devil, there is only one sure preventive: to travel the other way. Every wicked man has worked for small wages; the rewards of wickedness are never equal to the pains and penalties.

IV.

People never make a mistake in their final verdict, and they have rejected the religion of creeds. It has been given a fair trial, and failed. This is the truth, and it is important.

Church people generally recognize their mistakes, but they are silent in reference to them. The world, however, is busy pointing out the absurdities which many men call gospel.

There is danger in this: careless men are liable to imagine that since the old doctrine has failed, there is no hell. The church has compromised on this ques-

tion until the theological hell is almost comfortable, but the hell of conscience is the same dreadful thing it always was.

Ignorant scoffers at religion have never been popular; neither have the men who pretend to knowledge that no man can possess. The future is a blank: there can be no light in absolute darkness. Men have been conscientious as well as diligent in the long search after truth, and after exhausting all their powers, they have only discovered that the man, the horse and the thistle spring from exactly the same physical source. Men have discovered that they cannot know what the end will be, and the conclusion is inevitable that it was not intended that they should know. The fish of the Mammoth cave have no use for eyes, therefore they have no eyes: man is spiritually blind because it was so intended.

For fifteen hundred years men accepted a common religious faith, and although it was formulated very near the dawn of the Christian era, the Protestant

world now believes that faith to be wrong. This fact is significant: it indicates that a large majority of the Christian world is protesting against the religion originating nearest the Great Event on which the church is founded; it indicates that there was never a substantial basis for a religion of faith of any kind.

I am not a friend of the Romish church myself, but I pretend to say that the leaders of the Reformation taught dogmas as absurd as any of those of the church from which they separated. John Calvin believed in an electing grace which included only a part of the people, the others being left to perdition; he believed that this election came from God, and that such grace once given was never lost: he believed that election and perdition were both predestinated in the divine plan. Was there ever a more monstrous dogma in the church from which Calvin seceded? Martin Luther, another leader of the Reformation, taught justification by free grace alone, and the church which bears his name to-day teaches that the bread of the sac-

rament is the actual flesh of the Saviour, and the wine the actual blood. There is not a church in the Reformed list which does not contain absurdities equally discouraging to intelligent men of pious instincts; the Reformation was therefore not a reformation of religion, but the adoption of another set of dogmas, and the world to-day, in its opposition to theology, makes no distinction between the dogmas of the Catholic church, and the dogmas of the Reformation.

Luther and Calvin seceded from a church the history of which possibly began with the pastoral commission given after Christ's resurrection to the Apostle Peter. The Apostles Paul and St. John lived during the earliest years of this church, according to current history, and were among its teachers. St. James, who is called the brother of the Lord, presided as Bishop of Jerusalem, and St. Mark founded the church at Alexandria. This does not prove the infallibility of the Catholic religion, but it indicates that the dogmas of

the Reformation, which date from the sixteenth century, are not more worthy of credence than the dogmas formulated during the lives of some of the Apostles; it certainly indicates that there has always been confusion and doubt, and that there always will be until men recognize only the knowledge actually given them.

There seems to be as little excuse for the church itself as the creeds over which its adherents are quarreling, to the neglect of more important things. In all his teaching Christ does not once recommend churches; in all he said he advised secret prayer, and condemned those who made long prayers in public places. In this oft repeated advice of prayer in the closet, did he not mean communion with conscience?

But the fact with which we are principally concerned is that the world has grown better steadily, in spite of ignoring dogmas of every kind. The branch of the church to which we belong has been neglected so much that seven out of ten of its organizations

would go out of existence in a year but for the efforts of the women; and even they are actuated more by natural goodness than by faith in creeds: the goodness of the women has saved the old faith from total collapse.

Is there not evidence sufficient to cause men to think, and think seriously? I am an old man, but I have so much confidence in real piety that I hope to hear before I die that the church has triumphed over dogma, which has become the world's greatest enemy. Reason has saved many men where faith has failed, and I hope to hear it preached in every pulpit. If reason does not come to the assistance of the pulpit soon, coming generations of men will laugh at our religious history, and read our Bible for amusement, as we now read Greek mythology; if the signs of the times are not accepted, and acted upon, the world will be redeemed, and the church will receive none of the credit.

Men do not love God for the reason that they were given no such capacity, and they have come to believe that wor-

shiping an idol of stone or wood is no greater folly than worshiping a spiritual idol which gives no indication that worship is expected, or will be of benefit to any one. They have come to believe that men should obey the law of their being, and that they are not guilty of impiety in doing their best.

I am so certain that evil never prospers that I do not believe there is a Devil to prosper on wickedness. There has been much groping among scientific men to prove the existence of spiritual law in the natural world, but all science proves that nature demands good conduct of men, and that any violation of this law will be punished as certainly as we punish a balky horse. Every one must have pitied the stubborn folly of a balky horse; every one must have thought the horse would be better off to go quietly about his

work. Every erring man has a master more inexorable than the owner of a balky horse: it is the command of nature that the race shall only exist by means of law and order always indicating honesty and fairness. I do not believe that duty is ever heroic; a man should do his duty because it is easier than to neglect it. You cannot succeed in anything, except ruin, without honesty. The banker who has a large amount of money in his possession might easily run away with it, but he knows that honesty will pay him better. There are many natural rogues who are honest because of the knowledge that dishonesty never succeeds.

Wrong doing of every kind should be avoided for many reasons, but the most important is this: you never get through paying the penalty; you must pay it over and over again. Wrong confronts you when innocence would do you most good, and when you are most anxious to forget it. If you have a worthy object in life, the wrong you do will prevent its accomplishment. The little peace

there is in this world comes most surely to those who do their duty, and society is as infallible as the conscience in never making a mistake.

This doctrine is held by many pious people. "Admitting that there is no form or manner of life after death," a good old man said to me once, "my religion will cause me to live a more useful life, and a happier life, than that of the wicked man. Because of my religion I avoid many mistakes that would cause me sorrow and pain. I have prospered better in a worldly way, and enjoyed more pleasures, and had more of the respect of my fellow men, than the wicked man, even if there is no resurrection, and no soul, and no God." This doctrine influences men more than faith; I am sorry there is any other. In every family where there is a vigorous religion of doctrine, the children are being trained up into infidels, who will express their contempt for pious things by an excess of wickedness. Right teaching never has this effect.

V.

The true Reformation is yet to come. There is so much religion that is undeniably false, and there is so little reason to believe that a merciful God would permit one true dogma, and two thousand false ones, that we conclude that in this modern babel there must be some simple and universal truth for the guidance of men.

The manifestations proving an entirely different state of things, must be false manifestations: the Father would not manifest himself to one people, and allow another to go to endless death because of a lack of it. If the Father loves the lowly and humble, as I believe, there is much need for his mercy among

the millions who are taught by faith and experience to deny that which our answer to prayer has declared to be the sacred truth.

Our plan of salvation is but one of many; one of the great race religions has more followers than all branches of the Christian church combined, and of Bibles and Saviors besides our own, there is a considerable number, all teaching by prophecy, and by faith and experience. In declaring that these experiences and Saviors and Bibles are wrong, the thought must force itself into every candid mind that possibly our own dogmas are wrong.

There is much in the Bible concerning false teachers, and the great number of religious doctrines becomes prophetic evidence that the truth from on high is yet to be declared. But in every religion known there is a strain teaching the importance of doing right. This indicates to my mind that a guide was given to every man, whatever the place of his birth, to direct his steps in the easiest paths; in spite of the false religious

theories there is one rock on which every man may build a sure foundation: It is the Conscience, and it appeals to Mussulman and Methodist alike; it is the one touch of divinity, whether it is recognized in mosque or chapel, or in the seclusion of the closet.

Of the many thousand forms of dogma there is not one of universal application, but the simple religion of the Conscience appeals to all men, whether they live in the East, or the West, or the North or the South. I am willing to accept any religion that will save the people, whether it be a religion of creed, or dogma, or faith, but the people are in rebellion against all these; therefore the need of a system of morals founded on intelligence and human understanding. Civilization has done nothing for religion except to put the old idols out of sight.

One of the liberties demanded by the leaders of the Reformation was a free Bible. We have had a free Bible for hundreds of years, but we fail to agree on its teachings: no two

members of the same church exactly agree as to their belief, and the people are not so religious now in proportion to the population as they were before the Reformation: Christ in the Conscience has been forgotten in the quarrel over Christ in the Creeds.

Honest men will not always submit to a religion that actually does no good. There will be a change, and the churches may take part in the reformation that is near at hand, but first they must abandon every trace of the religious feticism which is so repugnant to modern intelligence. So many honest men have joined the revolt that it can no longer be called a revolt against religion; it is rather a demand from the century of progress for a religion of simple and universal truth.

There is little doubt that the teachers of theology generally know that their system is fiction, but some of them generously give as an excuse that the people are ignorant, and must be saved in this way. I do not accept this theory at all: by the time the people are taught to ac-

cept a dogma, they discover it is not true, and ever after they have less faith in true religion. And other men do not accept this theory. There is so much protest in the church of late against church nonsense that it is now thought best to quit trying men for heresy; those in revolt are generally intelligent men, and always good men, and the church dare not break with them. In the modern church you hear very frequently of members who have too much piety, and too much doctrine; only the other day a delegate to a world's convention of a religious denomination stated that the members were so concerned with proving doctrine that they had forgotten the common decencies of life.

No man or church is the custodian of my future welfare; my conscience teaches me duty more surely than I can be taught through the conscience of other men. Other men would teach me through dogmas that I know to be false, but my conscience has never made a mistake; there is not a good lesson in the Bible that a man may not learn from

the unfailing light given every man by his creator. Every subject is a king, and he need only recognize the King of Kings who created him. This declaration is found in both the old and the new Testament: "And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them." Moses left the same declaration: "The word," he said, "is very nigh unto thee."

Every man may know the truth, but no amount of faith will cause any man to know more than the truth.

Every man must decide for himself what this simple and universal truth is, since all experience proves that there is no other method of settling the question, and I believe it to be this:

CONSCIENCE IS THE PROPHET; THAT IT IS BETTER TO DO RIGHT THAN WRONG, IN EVERY MATERIAL SENSE, IS THE FULFILLMENT.

THE END.

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